

# Tears of joy and jubilation as Cuba-trained medical students return home

08 July 2018

Six years ago, Zazi Zulu left home as a starry-eyed 17 year-old matriculant to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor. Coming from a poor home at Umgungundlovu District, the odds of realizing his dream had been stacked heavily against him. But, being an academically-gifted student, he made an application and was awarded a bursary by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health to study medicine in Cuba, thousands of kilometres away from home.

Zulu, now a confident young man aged 23, was today reunited with 10 family members at the King Shaka International Airport. Each one of them wore a specially-designed black T-shirt written “Dr Zazi Zulu” and they carried a big banner with the message: “Welcome Back, Mageba.”

Now Zulu just can't wait to get down to the business of helping his community.

Zulu was part of the first of three groups from a total of 260 students who are returning from Cuba. They will spend the next 18 months of his studies at a South African university, and then be dispatched to his district of origin to start working as a doctor.

*“I’ve spent six years in Cuba, and was very pleased with the warm reception that we have received upon our return. I am looking forward to applying all the knowledge that I have gained in Cuba. I want to use my skills and expertise and work with diligence for the benefit of my fellow compatriots. My success up to this point has not been due to my wisdom, but rather the Grace of God. There have been many challenges along the way. And it’s not just been academically, but being away from home, in another country... everything is different. The ability to adapt varies from person to person. But I attribute my progress and success to God. He has been graceful to me, and I’m very grateful. I’m looking forward to starting to work in local hospitals and interacting with the patients, and to work alongside local doctors,”* he says.

Zulu is extremely grateful to the Government of South Africa, *“because, truth be told, if it wasn’t for this programme, we would never have been able to study medicine. As we know, there are too few places to study medicine at local universities and many of us are from poor backgrounds. We are grateful, and hope that they will be able to help uplift others as well.”*

At a homecoming ceremony to the Cuba-trained students this morning, KZN Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo was held aloft by some of the jubilant parents of the students. He says *this is a historic and profoundly significant moment in the country’s history, as the return of these students will increase the Province’s capacity to deliver healthcare to the public, including in far-flung rural areas where the global shortage of doctors is felt acutely.*

He says the students homecoming carries even more significance as it coincides with the celebration of the centenary year of Struggle hero Nelson Mandela and Mama Albertina Sisulu, who was a nurse and later became a prominent anti-Apartheid activist. The returning students were part of the 2885 South African medical students in Cuba at various levels of study. No fewer than 590 doctors have already qualified from the training programme since it started in 1996, while 98 students are doing their final year at South African medical schools.

MEC Dhlomo says: *“The return of the students is very exciting. It is humbling. You could see the parents crying tears of joy. They remember how they’ve navigated this journey of six years in a foreign country. We are extremely thankful to the pioneers of this programme, President Fidel Castro and President Nelson Mandela. And our very own Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who was the first democratically-elected health minister when this programme was started. We thank the current minister, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, who has been championing this programme. We now are vindicated that we were correct to send these students to Cuba. More than that, we are implementing National Health Insurance, which focuses on primary healthcare. These students,*

coming back as doctors trained in Cuba, are driven by that as a way of life: primary healthcare, health promotion, health education, prevention of diseases, all of which is exciting for us as South Africa. We are hoping that we are going to turn the corner, thanks to them. "They are going to be the champions to break the chain of poverty in their families. The children of these students will also not need to receive bursaries anymore because their parents will now be able to afford their education. And that is extremely important."

Acting Head of Department Dr Musa Gumede congratulated the students on their return, but warned them to "celebrate, but not overdo it," as they will be resuming their studies at universities around the country on 01 August 2018.





Dr Zazi Zulu